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The Value Gap: How Gender, Generation, Personality, and Politics Shape the Values of American University Students

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Abstract

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, in their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018), portrayed current undergraduate American college students (most of whom are in the generation Gen Z: 1995-2013) as valuing emotional well-being and the advancement of social justice goals above traditional academic values such as academic freedom and the pursuit of truth. We investigated whether this value discrepancy exists among 574 American university students by exploring the prioritization of five different academic values (academic freedom, advancing knowledge, academic rigor, social justice, and emotional well-being). We also explored how gender, generation, personality, major, and conservatism predict each academic value. Generational differences were present, with Gen Z students emphasizing emotional well-being and de-emphasizing academic rigor. Males scored higher on measures of academic freedom and advancing knowledge, while lower on social justice and emotional well-being compared to females. Political conservatism was the strongest predictor for social justice scores, with increased liberal attitudes predicting higher scores on social justice. Emotional stability positively predicted advancing knowledge, while negatively predicting emotional well-being. Agreeableness positively predicted emotional well-being, while negatively predicting advancing knowledge. We ultimately argue that gender is a crucial, underestimated explanatory factor of the value orientations of American college students.

Keywords: Higher Education, Academic Values, Social Justice, Sex Differences, Generational Differences

American college students are living in an age of unprecedented political and affective polarization (Dimok & White, 2020). Within the United States, unfavorable feelings toward political outgroups have been steadily increasing since the 1980s and are now reaching recordhigh levels (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2020; Iyengar et. al, 2019). In tandem with increasing cross-partisan animosity, there is a potent fear among some students, professors, and administrators that social, economic, and environmental progress in the United States is in sharp decline. These concerns can be seen manifested in various forms of new or amplified social movements present within institutions of higher learning (e.g., disinvitations, calls for cancelations, trigger warnings, and designated safe spaces). This activism has become a source of contention and debate (see Boysen, Isaacs, Tretter, & Markowski, 2019; Campbell & Manning, 2018; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018), and has occasionally led to the politicized targeting of professors and students who do not hold progressively aligned values and beliefs (Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020). Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) astutely observed these trends, and argued that on many college campuses, the value of emotional sensitivity and social justice have superseded other goals such as academic freedom and truth seeking. Haidt (2016) has even argued that universities are facing a transition where a choice is forced between these two competing and often opposed values: the teaching of social justice and the advancement of knowledge and truth.

Lukianoff and Haidt's (2018) argument lies, however, in an assumption that many current American university students actually do prioritize both social justice and the emotional wellbeing of students above more traditional academic values. Thus, we unpack the value orientations held by American university students and explore how factors such as gender, generation, political conservatism, personality, and chosen major may predict five different academic values.

Overview

The impetus for this study stems from the work of Planke and colleagues (2018; see also Geher et al., 2020) who analyzed how American university professors' academic values relate to their political orientations, gender, and personality characteristics. Planke et al. (2018) organized academic values into five distinct categories: advancing knowledge (teaching toward the discovery of truth), academic rigor (creating a challenging academic environment), emotional well-being (supporting the emotional needs of students), social justice (teaching how to make the world a more equitable place), and academic freedom (teaching what professors desire to teach).

Political Ideology and Academic Values

Because political affiliation plays a central role in shaping and predicting human values (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Hirsch, Xu, Deyoung, & Peterson, 2010), Planke et al. (2018) predicted that affiliation would also predict one's preference for particular academic values. Their intuition was supported, finding that conservative professors tend to prioritize values such as academic rigor and advancing knowledge moreso than do liberal-leaning professors; while liberal professors tend to prioritize values such as social justice and emotional well-being moreso than conservative professors do.

Studying distinct academic value preferences as a function of political ideology is important to examine because university professors have become more hegemonically liberal over the past few decades (see Wright, Motz, & Nixon, 2019; Cardiff & Klein, 2005), thus potentially shifting what values are being prioritized on campuses and in classrooms.

Importantly, the political discrepancies between liberals and conservatives are much wider in some academic fields relative to others. With the knowledge of these political asymmetries, Planke et al. (2018) predicted and found unique variation of academic values across university departments. Professors in the social sciences and education, who tend to have more liberal-leaning views, embrace the values of social justice and emotional well-being far more than professors in the hard-sciences and business where the discrepancy between political ideologies is smaller (Cardiff & Klein, 2005; Planke et al., 2018). Those in the hard-sciences and business departments, on the other hand, distributed more weight toward values such as academic rigor, academic freedom, and the advancement of knowledge.

Gender and Academic Values

The differences in academic value preferences found by Planke et al. (2018) were also moderated by gender: female professors significantly valued social justice and emotional wellbeing values above and beyond male professors across departments. This finding aligns with previous research showing gender differences among Schwartz's universal values (e.g., self-transcendence, conservation, self-enhancement, and openness to change; see Schwartz, 2012 for details) and other research showing how women tend to value more communal behaviors while men tend to value more agentic-like behaviors (Jonason & Fletcher, 2018; Schwartz & Rubel-Lifschitz, 2009).

Personality and Academic Values

Personality variables have been shown to relate to one's value prioritizations (Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994; Planke et al., 2018; Roccas, Schwartz, Sagiv, & Knafo-Noam, 2002), leading Planke et al. (2018) to consider personality as a relevant predictor of one's academic value orientation. Roccas et al. (2002) found that agreeableness correlated positively with benevolence (i.e., caring, loyalty, etc.) and tradition (i.e., respect for traditional norms) values, openness with self-direction (i.e., independence oriented) and universalism values (i.e., social-justice oriented), extraversion with achievement (i.e., success, influence, intelligence) and stimulation (i.e., excitement) values, and conscientiousness with achievement and conformity (i.e., obedience, self-discipline) values.

In line with Roccas et al. (2002), Planke et al. (2018) found that among professors, agreeableness correlated positively with scores on valuing both emotional well-being and social justice. In sum, the preponderance of the research suggests that academic values are partially a function of gender, personality, and political ideology, and we suggest that this may be as true for students as it was for professors.

Hypotheses

Our hypotheses for university students are as follows:

1. (1a) Academic rigor, academic freedom, and advancing knowledge will be correlated positively with each other, while (1b) social justice and emotional well-being will be positively correlated with each other. (1c) Academic rigor, academic freedom, and advancing knowledge will be negatively correlated with social justice and emotional well-being.
2. Social science majors will score higher in (2a) emotional well-being and (2b) social justice, while scoring lower in (2c) advancing knowledge and (2d) academic rigor compared to hard science majors.

3. Gen Z students will score higher on (3a) emotional well-being and (3b) social justice, while scoring lower on (3c) academic freedom, (3d) advancing knowledge, and (3e) academic rigor compared to older generations.
4. Women will score higher than men on measures of (4a) emotional well-being and (4b) social justice, while scoring lower on (4c) academic freedom, (4d) advancing knowledge, and (4e) academic rigor compared to men.
5. Conservatism will positively predict (5a) academic freedom, (5b) advancing knowledge, and (5c) academic rigor, while negatively predicting (5d) social justice and (5e) emotional well-being scores.
6. Agreeableness will (6a) positively predict emotional well-being and social justice, but (6b) negatively predict advancing knowledge, academic rigor, and academic freedom. Emotional stability will (6c) negatively predict emotional well-being and social justice, but (6d) positively predict advancing knowledge, academic rigor, and academic freedom. Openness to experience will (6e) positively predict academic freedom. Conscientiousness (6f) will negatively predict emotional well-being and social justice but (6g) positively predict academic rigor and advancing knowledge. (6h) Extraversion scores will not predict any of the academic values.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited using social media, the State University of New York at New Paltz SONA system, and publicly available, online student directories from American universities. All participants were above the age of eighteen and were undergraduates, graduates, or PhD students in the United States. Some participants from the State University of New York at New Paltz were granted credit toward their psychology major for completing the survey. No other participants were compensated.

Approximately 10,000 students were contacted for participation (from 48 universities across 27 U.S. states). 936 participants responded to the survey. 366 participants completed less than 60% and were dropped prior to analysis leaving a sample of 574 students.

Gen Z. 448 Generation Z (i.e., born from 1995 onward) students completed the survey: 129 men (29%), 302 women (68%), and 12 who chose not to identify ($M_{age} = 20.32$). ~51% were from the Northeast, ~7% Southeast, ~26% Midwest, ~6% Southwest, ~8% West, and ~2% chose “not mentioned above.” 353 participants were undergraduates, 47 were masters students, and 43 were PhD students. As a result of using what might be construed partly as a convenience sample, women were slightly overrepresented, while men were slightly under-represented relative to the general student population.

Millennials plus. 126 Millennial plus (i.e., born prior to 1995) students also completed the survey: 42 men (33.6%), 78 women (62.5%), and 5 who chose not to identify ($M_{age} = 30.83$). ~33% of the participants were from the Northeast, ~15% Southeast, ~18% Midwest, ~15% Southwest, 13% West, and ~7% chose “not mentioned above.” 23 participants were undergraduates, 44 were masters students, and 56 were PhD students. Similar to the Gen Z sample, relative to the general student population, women were slightly overrepresented, while men were under-represented.

Undergraduate majors. Majors were consolidated into “Hard Science” ($N = 189$) and “Social

Science” (N = 121). Examples of hard science include biology, engineering, and mathematics. Examples of social science majors include history, psychology, and economics. Students who did not fit into this binary (e.g., education, art, music, and business (n = 44)) were removed from analyses comparing differences across majors.

Materials

Academic Value Budget Allocation

We utilized Planke et al.’s (2018) Budget Allocation Measure with slight modifications. In the scale, participants distribute 100 points toward five different academic values in any way they desire but cannot distribute less than or more than 100 points. The academic values are categorized as advancing knowledge (professors prioritizing increasing students' understanding of the world), academic rigor (professors prioritizing creating a challenging work environment), emotional well-being (professors prioritizing student mental health and well-being), social justice (professors prioritizing teaching content related to issues regarding how to make society more fair for all people), and academic freedom (professors being able to choose what and how to teach content). Note that this method of measuring beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes has been shown to have many benefits over simply using Likert-scale items. The main benefit is that by giving participants a discrete “budget,” participants are required to think more carefully about how much they value certain attributes over others in a relatively nuanced and relatively realistic sense. This approach has demonstrated to show ecological and incremental validity relative to standard self-report measures in past work (see Li, 2008).

The 12-item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS; Everett, 2012)

The SECS includes 12 items for the participants to indicate how much they agree or disagree with a statement regarding a political issue by entering in a number ranging from 0 to 100 (0, 50, and 100, respectively, indicating Strong Disagreement, Neutral Agreement, and Strong Agreement). Examples of political statements include: Gun ownership should not be restricted; and Traditional Values are important to maintaining society.

The-Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003)

The scale includes 10 items that assesses the Big Five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability). On a 1-to-7 Likert scale, participants indicate how much they agree or disagree with statements that describe them (1 indicating Disagree Strongly and 7 indicating Agree Strongly).

Procedure

Participants completed this study online using Qualtrics and provided informed consent by selecting next after reading the consent protocol. Participants then completed the Budget Allocation Measure (the order of academic values was randomized), descriptive statistic, the SECS, and the TIPI (all items were randomized within each measure), and two additional scales which are not addressed in the current paper. All participants were then debriefed.

Analyses

Pearsons Correlations

Zero-order correlations were conducted to test the inter-relationships among the five academic values.

Major: Independent Samples t-test

Comparisons between the means of hard science and social science majors was tested using five Welch's independent samples t-tests.

Multiple Regression

Five multiple linear regressions were conducted to test that all five academic values are a function of generation, gender, conservatism, and personality as a suite of predictor variables.

Any individual with missing data in any of these four variables was excluded from the regression analyses ($n = 498$).

Because there is a high volume of statistical tests, we use a conservative estimate of statistical significance ($p < .01$) in order to reduce the chance of type 1 errors.

Results

Value Categorization

Hypothesis 1a was not supported (academic rigor, academic freedom, and advancing knowledge will be correlated positively with each other). Academic freedom was not significantly related to academic rigor ($p = .225$) and was negatively correlated with advancing knowledge, $r(572) = -.191$, $p < .00$. Additionally, academic rigor was negatively correlated with advancing knowledge, $r(572) = -.119$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 1b was not supported: Emotional well-being was not significantly related to social justice, $r(572) = .054$, $p = .195$.

Hypothesis 1c was supported, in that social justice was negatively correlated with academic freedom, $r(572) = -.147$, $p < .001$, advancing knowledge, $r(572) = -.375$, $p < .001$, and academic rigor, $r(572) = -.389$, $p < .001$. Emotional well-being was negatively correlated to academic freedom, $r(572) = -.305$, $p < .001$, advancing knowledge, $r(572) = -.477$, $p < .001$, and academic rigor, $r(572) = -.429$, $p < .001$.

Table 1

Zero-Order Correlations Within Budget Allocation Measure

Variables	Academic Freedom	Advancing Knowledge	Academic Rigor	Social Justice	Emotional Well-Being
Academic Freedom	1				
Advancing Knowledge	-0.191**	1			
Academic Rigor	-0.051	-0.119**	1		
Social Justice	-0.147**	-0.375**	-0.389**	1	
Emotional Well-Being	-0.305**	-0.477**	-0.429**	0.054	1

** = $p < .01$.

Academic Major and Academic Values (Undergraduates Only)

Hypothesis 2a was supported, in that social science majors scored significantly higher ($M = 26.46$, $SD = 10.07$) than hard science majors ($M = 21.83$, $SD = 13.56$), $t(308) = 2.796$, $p < .01$, $d = .39$, $CI [1.37, 7.88]$ on emotional well-being.

Hypothesis 2b was supported, in that social science majors scored significantly higher ($M = 16.46$, $SD = 11.38$) than hard-science majors ($M = 12.83$, $SD = 9.66$), $t(308) = 3.006$, $p < .01$, $d = .34$, $CI [1.25, 6.00]$ on social justice.

Hypothesis 2c was supported, as social science majors scored significantly lower ($M = 25.83$, $SD = 12.57$) than hard science majors ($M = 31.99$, $SD = 15.21$), $t(308) = -3.717$, $p < .01$, $d = .45$, $CI [-9.43, -3.03]$ on advancing knowledge.

Hypothesis 2d was supported, social science majors scored significantly lower ($M = 15.09$, $SD = 15.17$) than hard science majors ($M = 18.52$, $SD = 13.56$), $t(308) = -2.564$, $p < .01$, $d = .24$, $CI [-6.07, -.794]$ on academic rigor.

Multiple Linear Regression

All sequential regression models were significant, except for academic freedom which was approaching significance, $F(8, 489) = 1.945$, $p = .052$. See table 2 for a summary of the five multiple regressions.

Table 2

Multiple Regression Output Summary for All Five Academic Values

	Academic Freedom	Advancing Knowledge	Academic Rigor
	$F(8, 489) = 1.95, p = .052, R^2 = .015$	$F(8, 489) = 4.87, p < .01, R^2 = .059$	$F(8, 489) = 4.05, p < .01, R^2 = .047$
Constant	$\beta = 16.09, SE = 3.34^{**}$	$\beta = 39.01, SE = 5.00$	$\beta = 15.32, SE = 4.21$
Gender	$\beta = -3.21, SE = .959^{**}$	$\beta = -3.24, SE = 1.44^*$	$\beta = -1.38, SE = 1.21$
Generation	$\beta = -.389, SE = 1.00$	$\beta = 1.77, SE = 1.50$	$\beta = 4.16, SE = 1.26^{**}$
Conservatism	$\beta = .026, SE = .026$	$\beta = .028, SE = .039$	$\beta = .104, SE = .033^{**}$
Extraversion	$\beta = -.090, SE = .259$	$\beta = -.214, SE = .388$	$\beta = .134, SE = .327$
Agreeableness	$\beta = -.043, SE = .343$	$\beta = -1.47, SE = .514^{**}$	$\beta = -.818, SE = .432$
Conscientiousness	$\beta = .097, SE = .348$	$\beta = -.537, SE = .521$	$\beta = .124, SE = .439$
Emotional Stability	$\beta = -.070, SE = .293$	$\beta = 1.40, SE = .439^{**}$	$\beta = .499, SE = .369$
Openness	$\beta = .249, SE = .409$	$\beta = -.853, SE = .612$	$\beta = -.174, SE = .515$
	Social Justice	Emotional Well-Being	
	$F(8, 489) = 10.86, p < .01, R^2 = .151$	$F(8, 489) = 7.28, p < .01, R^2 = .092$	
Constant	$\beta = 9.43, SE = 3.51$	$\beta = 20.14, SE = 4.93^{**}$	
Gender	$\beta = 3.63, SE = 1.01^{**}$	$\beta = 4.20, SE = 1.41^{**}$	
Generation	$\beta = -.103, SE = 1.05$	$\beta = -5.44, SE = 1.48^{**}$	
Conservatism	$\beta = -.165, SE = .028^{**}$	$\beta = .007, SE = .039$	
Extraversion	$\beta = .660, SE = .272^*$	$\beta = -.489, SE = .382$	
Agreeableness	$\beta = .693, SE = .360$	$\beta = 1.64, SE = .506^{**}$	
Conscientiousness	$\beta = .397, SE = .365$	$\beta = -.081, SE = .513$	
Emotional Stability	$\beta = -.541, SE = .308$	$\beta = -1.28, SE = .432^{**}$	
Openness	$\beta = .628, SE = .430$	$\beta = .150, SE = .603$	

** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Note: Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female, **Generation:** 0 = Gen Z, 1 = Older Generations (Millennials +), **Personality:** 1(low) - 7(high), **Conservatism:** 1(liberal) - 100(conservative).

Generation

Hypothesis 3a was supported, while 3b was not (Gen Z students will score higher on (3a) emotional well-being and (3b) social justice compared to older generations). Gen Z students ($n = 395$) scored significantly higher ($M = 24.26, SD = 14.10$) than older generations ($n = 103; M = 18.31, SD = 11.63$) on emotional well-being, $\beta = -5.437, p < .01, sr2s = .026, CI [-8.34, -2.53]$.

Differences between Gen Z ($M = 14.94, SD = 9.85$) and older generations ($M = 15.11, SD = 11.10$) were not significant for social justice ($p = .922$).

Hypothesis 3c and 3d were not supported, but 3e was (Gen Z students will score lower on (3c) academic freedom, (3d) advancing knowledge, and (3e) academic rigor compared to older generations). Differences between Gen Z ($M = 15.82$, $SD = 8.99$) and older generations ($M = 15.55$, $SD = 9.11$) on academic freedom were not significant ($p = .698$). Differences between Gen Z ($M = 28.28$, $SD = 13.69$) and older generations ($M = 30.12$, $SD = 14.17$) on advancing knowledge was also not significant ($p = .240$). Gen Z students did score significantly lower ($M = 16.70$, $SD = 10.71$) than older generation students ($M = 20.90$, $SD = 13.85$) on academic rigor, $\beta = 4.162$, $p < .01$, $sr2s = .022$, $CI [1.68, .032]$.

Gender

Hypotheses 4a and 4b were supported (women will tend to score higher than men on measures of (4a) emotional well-being and (4b) social justice). Men ($n = 148$) scored significantly lower ($M = 18.78$, $SD = 13.21$) than women ($n = 350$, $M = 24.82$, $SD = 13.70$) on emotional well-being, $\beta = 4.20$, $p < .01$, $sr2s = .078$, $CI [1.42, 6.97]$. Men also scored significantly lower ($M = 11.18$, $SD = 10.93$) than women ($M = 16.59$, $SD = 9.30$) on social justice, $\beta = 3.63$, $p < .01$, $sr2s = .026$, $CI [1.65, 5.61]$.

Hypotheses 4c was supported, while 4d and 4e were not (women will tend to score lower on measures of (4c) academic freedom, (4d) advancing knowledge, and (4e) academic rigor compared to men. Men scored significantly higher ($M = 18.07$, $SD = 10.25$) than women ($M = 14.79$, $SD = 8.25$) on academic freedom, $\beta = -3.213$, $p < .01$, $sr2s = .023$, $CI [-5.10, -1.33]$.

Approaching significance, men scored higher ($M = 32.48$, $SD = 15.54$) than women ($M = 27.04$, $SD = 12.67$) on advancing knowledge, $\beta = -3.236$, $p = .025$, $sr2s = .01$, $CI [-6.059, -.413]$. Men scored higher ($M = 19.48$, $SD = 11.44$) than women ($M = 16.76$, $SD = 11.50$) on academic rigor but this was not statistically significant in the model ($p = .255$). See table 3 for the gender results breakdown.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Academic Values as a Function of Gender

		M	SD
Academic Freedom	Males:	18.07	10.25**
	Females:	14.79	8.25**
Advancing Knowledge	Males:	32.49	15.30*
	Females:	27.04	12.52*
Academic Rigor	Males:	19.48	11.44
	Females:	16.76	11.50
Social Justice	Males:	11.18	10.93**
	Females:	16.59	9.30**
Emotional Well-Being	Males:	18.78	13.21**
	Females:	24.82	13.70**

** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

N=498; Males = 148; Females = 350

Conservatism

On average, the students showed a liberal skew (M: 37.53, SD: 15.65).

Hypothesis 5a and 5b were not supported, while 5c was (conservatism will positively predict (5a) academic freedom, (5b) advancing knowledge, and (5c) academic rigor).

Conservatism was a significant positive predictor of academic rigor scores, $\beta = .104$, $p < .01$, $sr^2 = .020$, CI [.039, .169], but not a significant positive predictor of academic freedom ($p = .326$) or advancing knowledge ($p = .477$).

Hypothesis 5d was supported, while 5e was not (conservatism will negatively predict (5d) social justice and (5e) emotional well-being scores). Conservatism was a significant negative predictor of social justice scores, $\beta = -.165$, $p < .01$, $sr^2 = .068$, CI [-.219, -.110], but not a significant predictor of emotional well-being scores ($p = .856$). See table 4 for descriptives for conservatism and personality.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Personality Traits

	M	SD
Extraversion	3.89	1.64
Agreeableness	4.86	1.22
Conscientiousness	5.52	1.22
Emotional Stability	4.39	1.49
Openness	5.50	1.05

Note: Scores range from 1 (low) - 7 (high). N=498

Personality

Agreeableness.

Hypotheses 6a was mostly supported (agreeableness will positively predict emotional well-being and social justice). Agreeableness was a significant positive predictor of emotional well-being scores, $\beta = 1.64$, $p < .01$, $sr^2s = .021$, CI [.642, 2.63] and approached significance for social justice $\beta = .693$, $p = .055$, $sr^2s = .008$, CI [-.015, 1.40].

Hypotheses 6b was partially supported (agreeableness will negatively predict advancing knowledge, academic rigor, and academic freedom scores). Agreeableness negatively predicted advancing knowledge scores, $\beta = -1.47$, $p < .01$, $sr^2 = .016$, CI [-2.48, -.458]. Agreeableness was not a significant predictor of academic rigor ($p = .219$) but approached significance for academic freedom, $\beta = -.818$, $p = .059$, $sr^2 = .007$, CI [-1.67, .032].

Emotional Stability.

Hypotheses 6c was mostly supported (emotional stability will negatively predict emotional well-being and social justice). Emotional stability approached significance for predicting social justice scores, $\beta = -.541$, $sr^2 = .006$, $p = .080$, CI [-1.15, .064] and was a significant negative predictor of emotional well-being, $\beta = -1.28$, $p < .01$, $sr^2 = .018$, CI [-2.13, -.434].

Hypotheses 6d was partially supported (emotional stability will positively predict advancing knowledge, academic rigor, and academic freedom). Contrary to our prediction, emotional stability was not a significant positive predictor of academic freedom ($p = .810$) or academic rigor ($p = .177$). However, emotional stability positively predicted advancing knowledge scores, $\beta = 1.40$, $p < .01$, $sr^2 = .020$, CI [.533, 2.26].

Openness to Experience.

Hypotheses 6e was not supported (openness to experience will positively predict academic freedom scores). Openness to experience was not a significant predictor of academic freedom ($p = .542$) nor a significant predictor for any of the five academic values.

Conscientiousness.

Hypotheses 6f was not supported (conscientiousness will negatively predict emotional well-being and social justice). Conscientiousness was not a significant predictor of social justice ($p = .278$) or emotional well-being ($p = .875$).

Hypotheses 6g was also not supported (conscientiousness will positively predict academic rigor and advancing knowledge). Conscientiousness was not a significant predictor of academic rigor ($p = .777$) or advancing knowledge ($p = .303$).

Extraversion.

Hypothesis 6h was supported (extraversion will not predict any of the academic values). Interestingly, extraversion approached statistical significance as a positive predictor of social justice scores, $\beta = .660$, $p = .016$, $srs = .012$, CI [.125, 1.20].

Discussion

Based on the evidence provided, we have demonstrated support for Lukianoff and Haidt's (2018) claims that the values of emotional well-being are a primary concern of American college students. For Gen Z students, the balance between advancing knowledge and emotional well-being are held with equal weight. However, based on the unique contributing factors of conservatism, age, gender, and personality, it appears that Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) have painted an over-generalized portrait of the American college student.

Their argument that Gen Z students hold qualitatively different academic values than previous generations was only partially supported in our analyses. Importantly, Gen Z students did score significantly lower in academic rigor and higher on emotional well-being. It became clear however that what was as or if not more consequential than generation was the political attitudes, gender, and personality traits of the students.

Gender

Gender demographics on college campuses have been reversed over the past sixty years (Duffin, 2020; Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). Males dominated college campuses in the 1960s with a ratio of 1.6 male to 1 female undergraduate students, inverting, as of 2003, to become a ratio of 1.3 women to every 1 male undergraduate (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). The change in gender demographics within colleges is significant, as gender has been linked to differences in personality traits, value orientation, and conservatism (Eagly, Diekman, & Koenig, 2004; Chaturvedi, 2016). For example, men tend to be less liberal than women (Eagly, Diekman, & Koenig, 2004; Chaturvedi, 2016), men score lower on agreeableness and openness (Schmitt et al., 2008; Schmitt et al., 2016), and men have higher scores on emotional stability (Schmitt et al., 2008; Schmitt et al., 2016). In this study, it was found, (1) higher agreeableness was positively correlated with higher ratings towards social justice and emotional well-being, but lower ratings towards advancing knowledge and academic rigor. This research also showed (2) lower emotional stability was linked with higher scores on emotional well-being and social justice, while lower scores on advancing knowledge and academic rigor. In addition, the research reveals (3) that lower scores on conservatism predicted lower scores on academic rigor, but higher scores on social justice. These findings are significant as the factors which predict valuing social justice and emotional well-being are all intimately associated with gender.

Generation and emotional stability

Aside from gender, extensive research has shown that the Gen Z population, compared with older populations, seeks more mental health treatment and reports more emotional ailments (see American Psychological Association [APA], 2019). Importantly, emotional stability was the strongest negative predictor of emotional well-being scores.

Conservatism

Conservatism was the strongest predictor of social justice scores, explaining 7% of the total variance. As conservatism scores decreased (i.e., becoming more liberal-minded), scores on social justice increased. Thus, the increasing liberal skew of professors and students in universities (see Cardiff & Klein, 2005; Langbert, Quain, & Klein, 2016) may help us understand the increasing presence of social justice movements on American college campuses.

This study did not examine social class, race, ethnicity, or cross sectionality between groups. As suggested by al-Gharbi (2018), the lack of examinations of these identities might induce ideologically-driven errors by not accounting for systemic distortion of motivating values, but we leave the further exploration of these areas to future replications. In summary, our study has demonstrated that academic value orientations are a product of many independent factors such as generation, conservatism, personality, major, and gender. However, it seems that gender, in particular, is a more crucial predictor of academic values than previously thought.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this present research. The convenience sample used in this study was geographically over-representative of the Northeast with 33% of the sample size and undergraduates with 353 participants; in replication, to safeguard against skewness, a sample more representative of the national population should be sought. Also, the lack of cross-temporal

comparisons in academic values results in there being no reference point to compare scores. We are unable to demonstrate whether there has been a shift in academic values over time without having a baseline. In addition, we believe future studies would benefit from different constellations of major groups. While we used “Hard Science” and “Social Science”, these categories excluded 44 participants in the Humanities. Different groupings could potentially incorporate more students and provide more specificity. Further, our comparison between many of Gen Z and older generation students was limited due to differences in their level of education, as a result graduate status and generation were conflated. Future replications should aim to parse the effects of level of education and generation separately.

Based on reviewer input regarding our statistical processes, we decided to change the analyses that were to be conducted. We were initially going to conduct an array of t-test and ANOVAs. Instead, we decided to synthesize the different predictor variables into a multiple regression. As noted by Nosek, Ebersole, Dehaven, and Mellor (2017), post-hoc changes to methodology can lead to unforeseen and unconscious biased reporting.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that a multitude of factors including conservatism, gender, personality, major, and generation are valuable predictors of an individual’s academic value orientation. Our results support Lukianoff and Haidt’s (2018) claim that emotional well-being is a foremost value of Gen Z students, and that conservatism is a strong predictor of social justice orientations. However, we extend their argument by demonstrating the centrality of gender as a predictor of academic values, and that the influence of personality, conservatism, major, and generation can be best understood in the context of acknowledged sex differences.

College students’ focus on emotional well-being is reasonable when backdropped against the current cultural climate of political polarization, high stakes testing, and stress. The attempt to cope with emotional pain is not an adversary to truth. Rather, college student’s emotional suffering is reflective of the current times, and schools must accommodate for the emotional reality which the students inhabit. As we see it, universities should be encouraged to embrace emotional, subjective experience, while also continuing to laud difficult and rigorous debate for uncomfortable ideas. The balance to accommodate both emotional well-being and truth in academic settings is still being grappled with; universities must continue to value their students’ emphasis on emotional well-being (and the social and historical contributing forces) while simultaneously exerting authority to challenge subjective emotional experiences to help direct their student bodies toward truth and justice and toward ways of understanding the world based on data and best scientific practices.

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